

stag

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TRUE ADVENTURE

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FLIGHT PLAN

The passengers looked up in surprise as we entered the cabin. "I am now in charge of this plane," I said. "We are heading westward to freedom."

by JACK RITCHIE



At precisely 10 the plane began its long slow turn. I waited another five minutes before I got to my feet and made my way to the door of the pilot's compartment.

For a moment I glanced back at the other passengers, at the two gray-haired university professors, at the American deserter and at Anna Holazek. Then I passed through the doorway and pulled the metal door shut behind me.

Captain Kozlowski sat at the controls and Lieutenant Buyarski was in the co-pilot's seat next to him, his eyes closed and his head nodding gently.

Kozlowski turned and I lifted the automatic in my hand. His eyes met mine steadily and he smiled thinly. Then he tapped Lieutenant Buyarski on the shoulder.

Buyarski jerked slightly and opened his eyes. They widened as he looked my way.

I spoke loud and clearly so that I might be heard above the sound of the two engines. "You will please remove your weapons and drop them to the floor."

Kozlowski studied me, the thin smile still on his face, and then he shrugged his shoulders. His hands went to the buckle of his belt and a moment later he dropped his holstered weapon to the floor beside him.

Buyarski hesitated for 15 seconds before he followed Kozlowski's example. (*Continued on page 66*)

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID STONE







FLIGHT PLAN

Continued from page 30

"You will now set the controls to the automatic pilot," I said. "And then you will join the passengers."

Kozlowski did as I directed and rose to his feet. I stood aside in the narrow passage and let him pass. He stopped at the door and waited for Buyarski.

Buyarski's body was tense for action and I was careful. It would have been a pity to kill him. It was something that I would not wish to do, but it would be necessary if he tried to overpower me. But he went by me without incident and joined Kozlowski.

The eyes of the passengers flickered with surprise as we entered. I shut out the roar of the engines and motioned for Buyarski and Kozlowski to take seats.

"I am now in control of this airplane," I said. "We are going on to the west and freedom."

They all stared at me and then Lieutenant Buyarski's face flushed with anger. "We will be shot down by our planes before we get there."

I shook my head. "I do not think so, Lieutenant. We will be across the border in less than 20 minutes."

Buyarski's eyes were hot. "You cannot land this plane. And Captain Kozlowski and I will refuse to do so for you."

Kozlowski lifted an eyebrow. "You are so very brave for both of us, Lieutenant. But I am afraid I will have no choice."

"He is a traitor," Buyarski snapped.

"Ah, yes," Kozlowski said softly. "Comrade Walczak is a traitor—but he has a gun."

Captain Kozlowski was a slender man and his uniform was well tailored. His eyes went to Buyarski and he smiled. "Comrade Walczak is a traitor. But then your brother was one, too, wasn't he?"

Buyarski's cheekbones darkened with blood, but he stared at the floor and said nothing.

I leaned against the door to the pilot's compartment and examined the young American, James Girard. He had been a private in the American Army of Occupation in Berlin until two years ago when he had gone to the east. He was in his early 20s and he had a face that was thin and sensitive.

A sheaf of typewritten papers lay on his lap, but he was not looking at them now. Perhaps he knew the words by heart, or perhaps he was no longer interested in them. He had spoken them so often before our youth rallies and our meetings.

I spoke again: "It is only my desire to escape. I will not harm any of you if you do not attempt to resist me. But I will kill you if you try. As soon as this plane has landed in West Germany, you are all free to return."

Anna Holazek had hair of the darkness of pitch and her face was a pale cream.

She was one of our newer actresses and I had seen several of her motion pictures. She was young and she was beautiful, and the fur coat she was wearing was old and shabby.

The two professors who looked so much alike sat quietly, confusion in their mild eyes. Lemke and Graff were little men, gray and timid with the years, and their bodies were old. But their minds could still be used if the state could trust them.

We remained silent as time passed, each with his own thoughts. And then Kozlowski's eyes were on me and I glanced at my watch. The automatic seemed wet in my hand as I straightened up.

"WE are now in western Germany," I said. "We have crossed the border."

Anna's eyes went to her fur coat and she examined it critically. But it was the young man, Girard, who was the first to make up his mind.

He watched the papers of his speech slide off his knees and he did not pick them up. His eyes met mine and I could see that he would never return to the east of his own free will.

"You must realize," I said, "that you will probably be court-martialed for desertion when you return."

Kozlowski smiled. "It is possible. But you will be able to write many stories for the American magazines and you might earn much money. In America it is possible to escape punishment for many things if one has money. That is what American justice is like."

Girard's face was pale. "I am going home," he said softly, but with finality.

Kozlowski's voice was tinged with sarcasm. "Why did you come to the east?"

"To fight for peace," Girard said automatically. "To fight against the warmongers of the west. To fight against the injustices of the capitalist world."

Kozlowski crossed his legs and lounged in his seat. "Perhaps you have thoughts of selling military information you have learned. The capitalists should be willing to pay much money."

Girard's head came up. "I know no military secrets. I have been watched every day since I came to the east. I have never had one moment of freedom." He met Kozlowski's eyes. "Not one moment of freedom," he repeated slowly, as though he had just realized what he had said.

Anna Holazek spoke and she seemed to be talking almost to herself. "I have seen the American movies when I was a child in Prague. The women wear glistening furs and wonderful clothes."

"My child," I said, "you have often been told that the American workers do not live like that."

Her eyes became scornful. "I am no fool and I do not care how the American

workers live. I am young and I am beautiful and I shall learn English. I shall become a rich motion picture actress and I shall have servants. I shall have furs and I shall not always be cold as I have been ever since the liberation."

"Have you not been treated well by the state?" I asked. "Have you not been given favored food credits and cigarettes and an apartment?"

Her face twisted and she spat on the floor. "My apartment is but one miserable room and it is always cold." She looked at Kozlowski with hate in her eyes. "And I must entertain every man with a little power and be grateful for slight favors."

Kozlowski smiled and said nothing.

"Perhaps you have relatives," I said. "It will go hard with them." I met her eyes. "Perhaps you have a mother living?"

Her lips curled. "She is old and will not live long in any case. I have my life before me. I cannot be restrained by an old woman who has outlived her usefulness."

I felt very tired. "It is your decision," I said.

There was silence for 10 minutes, and then Graff stirred. He smiled quietly at Lemke. "We are old men, Anton, and we are alone. Perhaps we are fortunate in that respect."

"Yes," Lemke said softly. He paused for thought. "We have nothing but our work, and that is not the same as it was once."

"It has been a long time since we could talk and argue freely," Graff said. He smiled. "How we talked in the old days and argued half the night in the cafés. And all the argument was about the exact science of mathematics. Those were exciting times, Anton."

"It was our life," Lemke said, his eyes bright with reminiscence. "Our mathematics. It was our wife and our children and it was sufficient for us. We wanted nothing more than to be let alone and to talk and to have freedom."

Graff was silent for a few moments. "These last years have not been good ones, Anton."

Lemke met his eyes. "We have a few years left. Do you think the world we left in the east will change in our lifetimes?"

"No," Graff said slowly. "It will not change."

"You are both old men," I said. "It is a bad time for you to change your lives. What will you do in the free world?"

Kozlowski's voice was dry. "They will work for some American university. They will become Einsteins."

Anger came to Lemke's eyes. "No, Captain, we are not Einsteins. He was a great man and we are but Graff and Lemke. But we have contributed a little to the world and perhaps we can contribute more. We are mild men, Captain, but we do not like to be told that two and two are five or that a formula can be deviationist."

They had made their decision too. I wiped my face with a handkerchief and glanced at my watch.

The young man Girard regarded me curiously. "Why are you escaping? Is it for freedom alone?"

Kozlowski smiled. "I will tell you," he

said. "Comrade Walczak is a builder of bridges and one he built seven years ago collapsed this month."

"I was assigned unskilled labor," I said. "I had to use inferior materials and I did the best possible. I warned the authorities of the consequences."

"The people's government does not like failure," Kozlowski said. He smiled. "The bridge lasted seven years. How was your life while you waited, Walczak? Did you tremble every day for what you knew would happen?"

I did not say anything and the American spoke, "Why did you wait until now to escape?" he asked. "You had seven years."

Kozlowski watched me and I said, "It is a long way from Kharkov to the free world. I did not have the opportunity before."

Kozlowski turned to Lieutenant Buyarski. "Your brother took one of our planes to the west," he said. "I have heard that he was paid much money. The west wanted to have that plane."

"My brother was a traitor," Buyarski snapped.

"Of course," Kozlowski said gently. "A rich traitor." He studied Buyarski. "It is tragic to have a traitor in the family. How long have you been a lieutenant?" he asked pleasantly.

Buyarski flushed, but did not answer. Kozlowski clucked his tongue sadly.

Then he smiled. "Perhaps you too are waiting until you are given one of our new fighters to fly. The west would pay you much money."

"I am not allowed to fly them," Buyarski said angrily.

I turned to the smiling Kozlowski. "Are you not tempted to escape too, Captain?" I asked softly.

His eyes narrowed as he studied me. "You are a sharp man, Kozlowski," I said. "A brilliant man in your own fashion. You could do well in any society. Think of the future which awaits you in rich America. You would soon be a millionaire."

Kozlowski's face darkened. "My loyalty to the people's government has never been questioned."

"But loyalty is not enough, is it, Captain?" I smiled faintly. "Perhaps you have made your mistakes too. How long have you been a captain?"

He leaped to his feet. "Silence!" I sighed wearily. "You are forgetting, Captain. I have the gun and yet you command me to be silent."

Kozlowski's eyes went over the passengers for a moment and then he sat down.

And then we waited quietly, and when it was 11 o'clock I knew that we must be near the airport. I spoke to Kozlowski: "You will now land this plane."

He stood up and his eyes were cold as he surveyed the passengers. Then he moved past me. I followed him into the pilot's compartment and closed the door behind me.

Kozlowski took the pilot's seat and disconnected the automatic pilot. I stared for a moment at the airfield ahead of us and then took the seat beside him.

"My wife and children will be safe?" I asked.

Kozlowski smiled. "Of course. It is a promise. Naturally you may trust me."

"I have no choice. And will I be safe too?"

Kozlowski glanced my way. "We shall see."

He established radio contact with the airport and got his instructions. He began circling the field.

I watched our approach and thought of the passengers in the rear. They had made their decisions. Perhaps Buyarski would be a lieutenant no more. Perhaps he would be allowed to fly the new fighters.

Kozlowski was thoughtful. "I wonder if Buyarski is not more clever than I think. Perhaps he was not asleep when I made the turn."

Kozlowski smiled. "It was clever, was it not?"

"Yes," I said. "It was very clever."

"It is a fine way to test the unreliable. It is strange that no one has ever thought of it before."

I RUBBED my forehead and I was weary and sick at the thing I'd had to do so that the state would not harm my wife and children.

In a few more moments they would all know that we were not in west Germany and never had been.

Our wheels touched the ground of the airport on the fringes of Warsaw, and far down the runway I could see the group of uniformed men who were waiting for our passengers. ♦♦♦

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